



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 21
Issue 2 January 1981

Article 12

1-1-1981

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Recommended Citation

Duffelmeyer, F. A. (1981). A Comparison of Average Readers at Different Grade Levels. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 21 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol21/iss2/12

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A COMPARISON OF AVERAGE READERS AT DIFFERENT GRADE LEVELS

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Many standardized reading tests yield separate scores for vocabulary and comprehension. Sometimes the vocabulary and comprehension scores for a given student are more or less (if not exactly) the same. In other cases, one is substantially higher than the other.

The pattern of vocabulary and comprehension scores on a standardized reading test has been discussed by Arlin (1976). According to Arlin, there are three categories of readers: balanced, word dominant, and paragraph dominant. *Balanced* readers are defined as those whose levels of word meaning and paragraph meaning skills as measured by a standardized reading test are more or less equivalent. Readers whose skill in word meaning substantially exceeds skill in paragraph meaning are said to be *word dominant*. Finally, *paragraph dominant* readers are those whose paragraph meaning skill substantially surpasses skill in word meaning.

Support for the validity of Arlin's categories comes from evidence to the effect that vocabulary knowledge is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for comprehension (see Stratton and Nacke, 1974). After all, if vocabulary knowledge were a necessary condition for comprehension there could be no such thing as a paragraph dominant reader. Conversely, if vocabulary knowledge were a sufficient condition for comprehension there could be no such thing as a word dominant reader.

Of the three categories that Arlin has proposed, it would seem reasonable to expect that the balanced category would be the most prevalent, regardless of grade level. Less predictable, it would seem, is (1) the degree of similarity in the percentage of balanced readers at different grade levels, and (2) the relative incidence of word dominant and paragraph dominant readers at different grade levels.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the pattern of vocabulary and comprehension scores of average readers in grades two through six. More specifically, this study was undertaken to determine whether the percentages of balanced, word dominant, and paragraph dominant readers vary substantially as a function of grade level.

Method

Subjects

The subjects whose data were subsequently analyzed were 414

average readers in grades two through six. The average readers represented a little over half of the students who participated in the testing phase of the study. All of the students were enrolled in one of three elementary schools and one junior high school in a midwestern school district.

An average reader was defined as a student whose Total stanine score on the 1978 edition of the *Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests* was in the four-to-six range. The number of average readers by grade is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Number of Average Readers
in Grades Two through Six

Grade	2	3	4	5	6
Number	85	85	88	69	87

Tests

The standardized reading test which was used as a basis for studying the pattern of average readers' vocabulary and comprehension scores was the 1978 edition of the *Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests*. The students in grades two and three were administered Form 1 of Levels B and C, respectively. The students in grades four through six were administered Form 1 of Level D. Each Level consists of a Vocabulary test and a Comprehension test. Normative scores are provided for both tests individually and for the two combined (Total).

Procedure

All of the students who participated in the testing phase of this study were tested in October of 1978. Each student's Total raw score was converted to a national stanine score using the appropriate norms tables in the various Teacher's Manuals. For those students who obtained a Total stanine score of four, five, or six—the middle third of the stanine scale—the Vocabulary and Comprehension test raw scores were also converted to national stanine scores in order to determine to which reader category, i.e., balanced, word dominant, or paragraph dominant, they should be assigned. Stanines were selected for this purpose because they measure achievement in relatively broad classes, and therefore help take into account the range of scores that might be obtained with repeated testings. In operational terms, Arlin's reader categories were defined as follows:

Balanced: a reader whose Vocabulary and Comprehension stanine scores were either identical or failed to differ by more than one stanine.

Word Dominant: a reader whose Vocabulary stanine score was

two or more stanines higher than his/her Comprehension stanine score.

Paragraph Dominant: a reader whose Comprehension stanine score was two or more stanines higher than his/her Vocabulary stanine score.

After the students in each grade had been classified as to reader category, the percentage of students by grade in each category was calculated.

Results

The percentage of balanced, word dominant, and paragraph dominant readers in grades two through six are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Percentages of Balanced, Word Dominant, and
Paragraph Dominant Readers in Grades Two through Six

Grade	N	Balanced	Word Dominant	Paragraph Dominant
2	85	83%	12%	5%
3	85	88%	9%	3%
4	88	79%	14%	7%
5	69	84%	9%	7%
6	87	80%	12%	8%

An examination of Table 2 reveals that regardless of grade level, the vast majority of readers were balanced. Furthermore, the percentage of balanced readers in each grade was virtually the same, ranging only from a low of 79% (fourth grade) to a high of 88% (third grade).

The next most prevalent category was word dominance, again regardless of grade level. The percentage of word dominant readers ranged from a low of 9% (third grade and fifth grade) to a high of 14% (fourth grade). For the paragraph dominant category, the range was from 3% (third grade) to 8% (sixth grade).

Discussion

In addition to providing support for the validity of Arlin's reader categories, the results of this study indicate that average readers at different grade levels have more in common than their relative standing among their peers. The percentages of balanced, word dominant, and paragraph dominant readers did not vary substantially from grade to grade.

The nature of this uniformity suggests that regardless of grade level, the comprehension ability of average readers is largely limited by their ability to assign meanings to individual words. Otherwise, one would expect to witness a lower incidence of balance, and a higher incidence of paragraph dominance. To put it another way, the data collected in this study suggest that average readers are at best only moderately proficient in terms of making use of contextual information as an aid to comprehension.

This inference raises an interesting question. Would systematic attempts to improve average readers' ability to make use of contextual information result in a lower incidence of balance and a higher incidence of paragraph dominance? Inasmuch as an instructional approach aimed at improving average readers' ability to make use of contextual information might result in the development of more proficient readers, it would seem that a study designed to answer this question is warranted.

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